

SETTLEMENT PATTERN OF SOME TRIBAL GROUPS OF THE  
NORTH-EAST - THE KHASIS AND GAROS OF MEGHALAYA

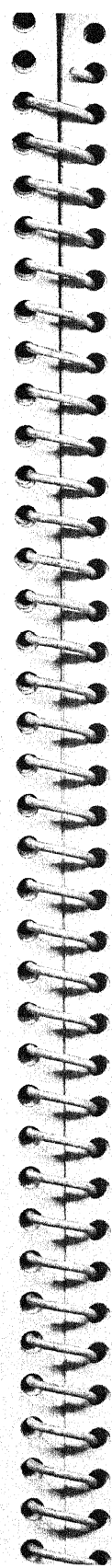
Sponsored by  
Indian Council of Social Science Research

NALINI NATARAJAN  
INDIAN INSTITUTE OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION  
NEW DELHI



A Ph.D in Sociology from Bombay University, Dr. Nalini Natarajan had a spell in the Indian Administrative Service before opting for Social work, research and collegiate and post-graduate, teaching in the north-eastern India. She is currently on the Faculty of the Indian Institute of Public Administration, directing courses on Tribal Development and conducting research. She is an Associate on Current Anthropology(Canada) in the fields of Sociology and Cultural Anthropology. Besides many articles, her work includes the following:

| <u>Title</u>  | <u>Subject</u>                              |
|---|---|
| 1. The Missionary Among the Khasis  | Cultural Anthropology,<br>Published 1977.   |
| 2. The Functioning of Democracy in an Assamese and Khasi Village: A comparative Study.  | Political Sociology,<br>Under Publication.  |
| 3. A study of the committees and commissions appointed by the Government of India for tribal welfare in Post-Independent India. | Applied Anthropology,<br>Under Compilation. |





## A C K N O W L E D G E M E N T S

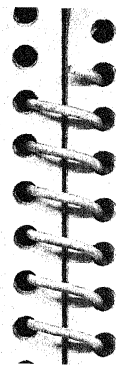
My very sincere thanks are due to Dr. J.V.Ferreira for his guidance and help in this study. This paper is the result of my dialogues and deliberations with him.

Many thanks are also due to the Indian Council of Social Science Research for the assistance made available and to Dr. Leela Dube for her counsel in every matter.

Prof. R.N.Haldipur gave continued counsel and the Indian Institute of Public Administration provided every facility. My many thanks for the same.

The typing and other matters were attended to by S/Shri Chawla, Kaushik and Ramakrishna. I am thankful to them.

I am indebted to my numerous friends in Meghalaya, Civil Servant's, Public leaders and village resident's for their ready help and cooperation.



SETTLEMENT PATTERN OF SOME TRIBAL GROUPS OF THE  
NORTH-EAST - THE KHASIS AND GAROS OF MEGHALAYA

- Nalini Natarajan

PART I: INTRODUCTION

The United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Vancouver 1976) stressed the need for a careful study of both tiny and big human settlements, based on the realisation that cultural, economic demographic, ecological, political and social factors were to be viewed as a totality.

In this paper, I have studied two rural shelter and settlement patterns (SSPs) of the matrilineal Khasis and Garos of Meghalaya. These form interesting universes for study owing to exposure to influences of new religions, secularisation, migration, recent urbanisation, technology and man-nature relationships. The village system forms the basis of the relatively isolated tribal regions of India, as of other regions. The above two universes suggest conformity to two concepts - kinship and territory. The second, in addition, conforms to the concept of property. While conforming to a broad regional pattern, they also display some variety that can be linked to their ethos and social organisation.

AIMS:

This regional account of two SSPs studies the Khasi and Garo environment, shelter, settlement and culture as correlates

relating their SSPs to a historical dimension. The focus is three-fold:

- (a) Functional-technical
- (b) Symbolic
- (c) Acculturative

The study also attempts to trace the root cause of rural and urban crisis in these areas to a moral crisis.

#### HYPOTHESIS:

The propositions that form the basis of this monograph are as follows:-

Man's shelter and settlement are not only conditioned by the imperatives of his natural environment but also express his symbolic system or his culture. When change occurs at these two levels, the shelter and settlement will also reflect this fact.

#### METHODOLOGY:

Combination methodology was used, and it included the following:

1. Field-data.
2. Documentary sources.
3. Questionnaires and schedules.
4. Indepth interviews.
5. Participant observation.

### EXISTING LITERATURE:

Six decades of thinking on human settlements have engendered studies and views of at least fifteen prominent intellectuals and leaders.

Gurdon, Nakano, Natarajan, Playfair, Burling and Majumdar have made references to the houses and villages of Khasis and Garos in their books. However, this is the first specific study of their shelter and settlement types from a three-fold perspective.

### PART II: KHASI HILLS AND THE KHASIS

The Khasi Hills lie in a seismic region and the approximate area is 5,904 square kilometers. The number of inhabited Khasi villages was 1839.<sup>1</sup> Ten per cent of the Khasis live in five urban centers in the Khasi Hills. The Census of 1971 gives the following population figures:

|      | <u>Persons</u> | <u>Males</u> | <u>Females</u> |
|------|----------------|--------------|----------------|
| 1971 | 3,52,000       | 1,75,000     | 1,77,000       |

The density per square kilometer in 1971 for the United Khasi Hills and Jaintia District was 42 persons and the income per capita was Rs. 373 in 1900.\* The per capita income in Meghalaya at Rs. 327.00 is one of the lowest, far below Rs. 480 to ensure a reasonable standard above the poverty line. Estimation of price levels in Meghalaya is Rs. 509.

\* Department of Economics and Statistics, Govt. of Assam.

NONGKREM VILLAGE: UNIVERSE I

Nongkrem village (literally 'the village of caves') at an altitude of 5,760 feet has an approximate area of 7 square kilometers. It is a stable settlement (referred to by older villagers as at least 3 generations old) with about 500 houses.\* It is at a distance of 15 kilometers from Shillong, the State Capital and 4 kilometers from Smit, the nerve center of Khasi culture where the chief resided since 1853. As an upland Khasi plateau village, its culture forms a useful model for the interpretations of variations found elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> It is named after 'Ka Pah Syntiew'<sup>3</sup> a fairy, whom the Khasi legend describes as the niece of the God Shillong seen by the village cowherds. A man of the Myllemgnap clan enticed her and tended her till her marriage. He belonged to one of the six original clans\*\* who stabilised a village after becoming victors of the Jaintias. The site was chosen primarily for purposes of defence. I was told that the six kyntoits, early administrative units of the village are named after these clans as whom land was bestowed in recognition of their services. This might explain individual pattern of land ownership in Nongkrem. The annual harvest dance festival, named after the village and goat sacrifice were held here. With shifting of the state headquarters to Smit in 1853,

---

\* a sketch of the village is enclosed (Annexure-1).

\*\* Myllemgnap, Myllem, Pdah, Warbah, Pongrup, Khyriem Mujat and Lyngdoh Nongkrem.

Nongkrem functioned as a lyngdohship, a smaller unit and became headquarters of the high priest. The present old lyngdoh has abdicated in favour of his popular young nephew who is dynamic, held in high esteem, and can speak english. An adviser on the syiem's council, he is ex-officio secretary of the communal durbar.

The lyngdoh's traditional house is a smaller replica of the original house of the chief which earlier stood at the same site. Perhaps, only this house functioned as a homestead.\* This house, representing Khasi culture is a symbol of prestige to the Khasis and is maintained since 1897. Certain prescribed taboos have been observed in its construction. For instance iron has not been used and entrance to the West has been avoided. But, the house faces the north-east, overlooking the Khasi preference for the north-east.

#### CHOICE OF UNIVERSE:

Nongkrem was chosen for study as it is a stable settlement with a Khasi population, is a stronghold of Khasi culture inspite of exposure to christian influences and is near the urban centre and state capital, Shillong.

#### Some relevant chronological dates:

- |    |  |      |
|----|--|------|
| 1. | Formation of the Khyrim Hima (State)                           | 1853 |
| 2. | Creation of the new province of Assam with Shillong as Capital | 1874 |

---

\* a unit where food was cooked in one kitchen for various families residing on the site and shared by them.

3. Building of the ing-lyngdoh (lyngdon's) house in Nongkrem. 1897
4. Shillong became the summer headquarters. 1904
5. Propagation of literacy and medicine through christian voluntary workers. 1905
6. Successive devastating fires destroying thatched houses. 1930
7. Purchase of trucks 1952-1954
8. Setting up of the Sixth schedule of the constitution of India. 1953
9. Use of public transport and ownership by local people of private vehicles. 1955
10. Opening of centers like Red Cross, the Cultural Club. 1958-1959
11. Building of the main village road by the Development Block and water supply starting of the Development Block. 1961
12. Opening of the two parts of the 9th kyntoit occupied by the army after the Chinese aggression. 1962
13. Building of the road by the P.W.D. and the building of bridges. 1964
14. Electrification and opening of the 10th kyntoit. 1965
15. Building of the new Presbyterian Church after dismantling the first building and improvement of water supply scheme. 1966
16. Formation of sub-state of Meghalaya. 1970 April
17. Formation of Meghalaya as a full-fledged state. 1972 January
18. Building of the road by the S.F.D.A. 1976



### PHYSICAL FEATURES OF THE KHASI VILLAGE:

Nongkrem, a riverine village with caves, has a jungle of bamboo and timber and little open space where paddy is grown. Springs and small rivulets intersect it. A group of erect and flat memorial stones considered sacred are a prominent feature of its landscape. A decade ago, when the road was extended, a group of these stones to the left necessitated a turning in the alignment of this extension to the right. The approximate division of the 7 square kilometers is as follows:-

|   |                |
|---|----------------|
| Residential area                                  | : 2 sq. kms.   |
| Rocky area  | : 1 sq. km.    |
| Forests   | : 1.5 sq. kms. |
| Agricultural land                                 | : 3.5 sq. kms. |
| (Land on slopes and cultivated between the rocks) |                |

A ridge marks one of the five entrances to the village. The abodes of 9 village deities are considered sacred although their worship is less frequent. The younger generation knows little about them. One deity, propitiated in times of war and disease, was worshipped last in 1901 when the nobles rebelled against their chief.

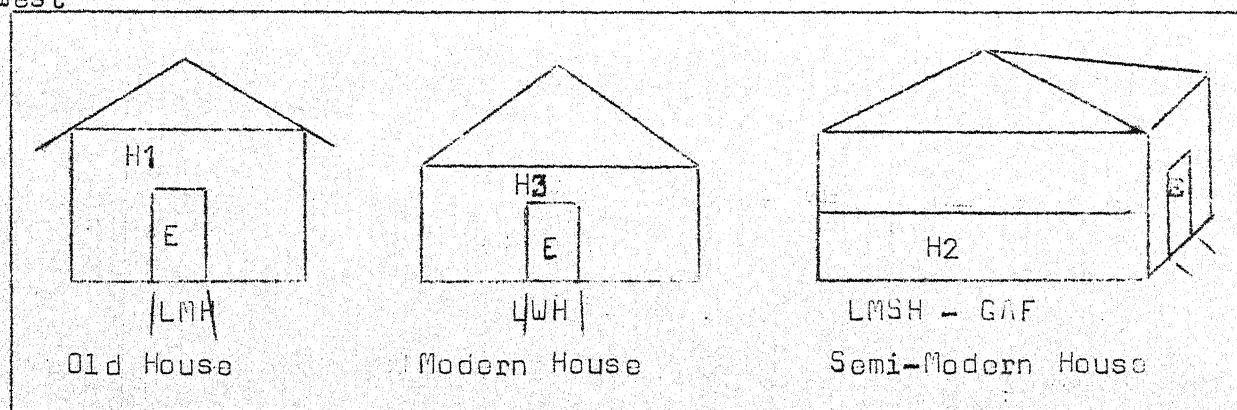
### SETTLEMENT PATTERN OF NONGKREM:

A description of the 10 kyntoits would help in the study of the SSP of Nongkrem. This includes the central place of growth, the elite area, the village outskirts, places of rural corporate life, the first non-tribal and intra-tribal influence on the village architecture, the impact of urbanisation, migration,

industrialisation and the use of technology.

The first kyntoit, Ringiksch is situated in the earlier market-place, opposite the main road where a few shops stand at present. Six of its 95 houses have a dpieh i.e. a separate cooking place for some members of the family. This indicates congestion, as otherwise the families could have lived in independent units. This is a new feature in the area where the land:man ratio is favourable. In this kyntoit the prestigious Nongkrem dance was held. A by-path, 100 yards distant, leads to the house of a young leader, the lyngdoh, an orthodox-non Christian Khasi, a descendant of the original lyngdoh (myntri) clan, the head of the commune and an ex-officio member of the village council. This house is built on a plot of land inherited by his wife, an orthodox Khasi whose parents and siblings were Christians. Along with the house of the wife's mother which is on the adjoining plot of the land; the house of his mother-in-law's sister on another side, again an adjoining unit of the land; the house of the lyngdoh's wife forms an interesting unit of study.

West



East

E - Entrance  
L - Lyndgoh  
H - House  
GAG - Ground and First  
M - Mother  
W - Wife  
MS - Mother's Sister

H1 was built 50 years before, H2 40 years before and H3 nearly 10 years before. Its entrance faced the east, the use of tin was sparing. Windows were few and the earlier thatched roof was replaced by corrugated Iron sheets. It was occupied by the lyngdoh's mother-in-law, a Christian and the Christian family. The lyngdoh's mother had inherited land from the family on the principle of female ultimogeniture of the Khasis. H2, built 40 years later, had two storeyed, the ground-floor was extended, it faced the west and tin and corrugated iron sheet's were used. The functional aspect had shaped its construction. Familism had shaped the thinking of this dwelling and the lady wished to bestow it on her youngest daughter. H3 was built in the center on a plot of land allotted to the lyngdoh's wife, an orthodox Khasi. In its construction, the symbolic, aesthetic and functional perspective had shaped the thinking. This ground-storeyed cement-concrete structure faced the east, beautiful flowers adorned the entrance and vegetables were cultivated in the back-yard. The leader was popular and paid only for iron rods and the glass as the villagers contributed the labour. Sand and gravel like other commodities were non-taxable. The building of a house and harvesting were corporate activities to the early Khasis. The insistence on cash wages has occurred in

the last 15 years. The inmates of the three units mixed freely and inter-dined. Thus, this unit functioned many times as a homestead.

Of the 45 houses in the second kyntoit which adjoins the first, 5 houses have a dpi<sup>ah</sup> and there are 3 water tanks. There are 3 schools and a High School Hostel. Besides residences, this kyntoit has 7 religious and educational institutions, and there is a cooperative society selling honey. These later institutions, indicate growth of the village and formal cooperative activity in the sectors of education, trade and religion.

The third kyntoit near the road had 65 houses with 3 dpi<sup>ehs</sup>. A new commodious Presbyterian Church built after dismantling of the first church in 1900 stands on the main road. Simple in construction like the Unitarian Church, the new Church reflects the influence of the Cathedrals of London. Another building functioned both as a school and a cultural club.

In kyntoit 4 stands the lyngdoh's house inherited by him from his maternal uncle who abdicated in favour of him. This age-old Khasi house modelled on the house of the chief, is symbolic of the early prestige of Nongkrem, before the chief shifted his headquarters to Smit. It had a raised platform and a thatched roof and no iron was used as the Khasis forbade the use. Like the house of the lyngdoh's mother-in-law, this house also functioned like a homestead. It housed a 4-generation depth family and families offering help lived in smaller adjacent units. The hearth was common and there was mobility between members

of the unit. Surprisingly, this house faces the north and is symbolic of the earlier prestige of Nongkrem as the seat of Hima and a place where decisions were taken regarding the corporate and other aspects of village life. This village council virtually functioned from this house and cultural and social meetings are also held there. In this house stays the lyngdohs mother, her husband, the heiress and other children. The unmarried heiress past the middle-age built her own house with her earnings on a small plot of land inherited by her. But she stays primarily with the mother and dines there. In this kyntoit stands new Unitarian Church built around 1936-1937 after the first building was dismantled in 1900. The approach road built by the S.F.D.A. in 1977 starts from the market place in kyntoit Nongkyn-dong.

Kyntoits 1-4 are affluent. Kyntoits 5-10 are less affluent. In kyntoit no.5 parallel to the main road, on the eastern side of the rivulet, there are 5 dpihs in the 65 families. There is no water tank. The earlier Roman Catholic Church was dismantled around 1945. A bigger church built in 1960 has been influenced by Italian architecture. An approach road from the main road to the kyntoit reaching out to the fields was built by the C.D. Block officials in 1961. It's primary benefits went to the agriculturists. Kyntoit 6 has 4 families with 3 or 4 dpihs of the 5 entrances to the village, the fifth one runs through kyntoits number 6 and 7. Kyntoit 7 adjoining 6 and 7 kyntoit 7, adjoining 3 and 6 is further away from the main road and has a school run



by Presbyterians. Approach road number 3 leading to smit runs through this kyntoit to the 6th one. There is also a Lower Primary School run by the Presbyterians.

In the 120 families at kyntoit 7, there are 6 dpihs. This kyntoit is partly poor and partly rich, reflecting both stagnation and growth. Presbyterians run one L.P.School and Catholics the other. In kyntoit no.8, there is a L.P.School and a road built by the S.F.D.A. There are 35 houses with one or two dpihs and one water tank. The two parts of kyntoit 9 are on the same society of the road and are not adjacent. Army personnel occupy nearly 200 houses in this kyntoit opened after the Chinese aggression of 1962 and meant primarily for the army personnel. The opening of kyntoit 10 was mainly because of congestion, particularly in the 1st kyntoit. In 1977, the Catholics built Homes for the Aged at the entrance to the village for very poor families. This kyntoit had a Soil conservation office, one District Council check-gate, one forest check-gate and two gedown of cooperative societies (Farmer's Multi-purpose Cooperative Society). The opening of this kyntoit has led to the reduction of 'dpih' which partly necessitated its opening. Residents of Nongkrem working or having dealings in Shillong have either migrated or commute there daily.

Thus, Nongkrem has a rural contour delineating influences of modern ideas regarding housing, agriculture, economy and education. Yet clan exogamy, tribal endogamy and female ultimogeniture deminate the social organisation, affecting both the

location and pattern of housing. Clan exogamy results in the constructing of a house in a different location and the pattern and size of housing may be influenced by the views of the youngest daughter, an heiress.

#### TECHNOLOGICAL IMPROVEMENT:

The village has 8 cement concrete and 7 wooden bridges. One main road, new extended, leads to the village which stops at the market place. Three agencies dealt with buildings of roads in the village viz. the C.D. Block, the S.F.D.A. and the P.W.D. Improvement of communication has led to a decline in the number of migrants from Nongkrem. Water supply is by tanks, taps and rubber houses. The village is partly electrified and does not accept the norm of the small family. For the past 15 years, 50 or 60 births are reported every year. 8 or 10 deaths were reported to occur every year.

#### PRESENT VILLAGE ECONOMY:

Agriculture is the primary occupation of nearly 80% of the 500 houses of this stable settlement. Paddy is grown for human consumption and for purposes of fodder. Improved agriculture practices and the shift from a subsistent barter to a monetised surplus, progressive and expanding with a cash-crop insistence have resulted in affluence for some wealthy, educated and progressive families. Livestock also fetches cash.

This affluence has added an aesthetic dimension to the shelter and settlement concept. Its visibility is noticeable in buildings and their horizontal and vertical expansion. Besides new styles, there is also the use of new building materials. The affluent number nearly 15%, the non-poor constitute 80% and 5% are poor. Nearly 3 per cent do not own houses. Their poverty may be attributed to poor health, extravagance or alcoholic addiction. The corollaries are illiteracy, ignorance, lack of aspirations and motivation. In Nongkrem, sand and gravel as natural resources are free commodities and are used increasingly in the construction of houses, roads and bridges etc.

#### EARLY KHASI HOUSES, RITUALS AND CEREMONIES:

At present, one hardly sees a small thatched house on stilts, or the old type Khasi house with the shape of an inverted 'U'. Bamboo, reeds, dry grass, mud ~~stones~~ and grass for thatching were used. The floor was of stone blocks or tamped earth and each house had two main apartments. Implements were kept in one part and the other used as shelter for poultry. The village chief requested every one, rich and poor alike to join in the building of the house. The building site was not considered ideal if two or three roads met at the spot.<sup>4</sup> The erection of memorial stones for the departed was the usual practice.

There were ceremonies for selecting the site before the commencement of the building and the final occupation of the house.



The family gathered round the hearth in the centre of the room relaxing late in the evening over songs and stories near the fire and drinks and meals were served.<sup>5</sup>

#### CHANGE IN THE CONCEPT OF SHELTER AND SETTLEMENT:

The change in the concept of Khasi SSP is presented below from three perspectives.

##### (a) Functional Technical

At present, housing is for 35 clans in place of the original 6. 500 houses accommodate a population of nearly 3,500 of which 3 are non-Khasi. Presbyterians came to the village a century before, the Unitarians followed 50 years later and the Catholics came 39 years before. A few revivalists came 18 years before and a few followers of the Turoi Gospel or Church of God came 6 years ago. Besides female ultimogeniture and clan exogamy, a modern aspect of social structure is independent units of shelter. Every new couple has its own independent establishment and teenagers from well-to-do families expect independent rooms for themselves.

Most Khasi houses today have the hearth at one side of the room near the fireplace. In houses of the less affluent, space is allotted for each type of work as cooking and of food and washing of utensils. Animals and poultry were kept below the house or huddled in a smaller unit nearby. In the bigger houses, rooms are allotted for each house job.

Nearly 50 years ago, a room or two were built above the first floor using wooden planks, mainly for the purposes of living in two houses. A decade later, one or two houses used vertical space. At present, there are nearly eight such houses. The increasing vertical space reflects a meeting point of the functional-technical, symbolic and acculturative processes. These new cement concrete buildings have more doors and windows. Many houses have bamboo gates. Wood and iron rods are also used. The space around is utilised more aesthetically by planting of flowers. Vegetables are grown in the kitchen garden. These modern houses are neat, beautiful and functional.

Since the past 50 years there is a decline in the practice of erecting memorial stones for the dead and also of resting stones for travellers. A memorial column with an elaborate floral cement ring crowing it stands at the entrance of a 40 year old house. In another house stands a pink cement-concrete round and square memorial tone built 5 y ars ago for a maternal uncle in the ancestral house of his sister by a Christian divorces deparated 40 years after marriage upon his return to the mother's ancestral house.

Among the functional-technical changes, the adding in a few houses of a bathroom, or a dry pit-latrine may be mentioned. Facilities for elementary sewage are non-existent whereas the interior of the house is decorated with picture-frames, curtains and furniture and there are laced curtains for the doors and windows. The new additions are gates of wood, iron, cement concrete or steps.

Electrification, water supply and improved communication have changed the entire face of the village within a decade. There is an increase in vertical and horizontal mobility among the villagers and urban migration has been checked for five years.

(b) Symbolic

Subtle changes in the SSP are manifestations of the economy receiving an impetus. Cement and concrete houses are preferred and use of iron is unrestricted. Iron was also used for water pipes.

I learnt that there was an increase in the annual rate of conversion. But in Nongkrem, as stated earlier, the basic social structure and female inheritance were almost unaffected. Rituals and ceremonies associated with selection of the village and housing sites, its protection and well-being declined. Instances are dancing, harvest festivals, worship of deities and divination for determining auspiciousness of the site. Such changes herald a new era and rationale in thinking. The belief that a triangular site was considered unlucky was not known to many Khasis.

However, certain rituals were continued even by some Christian Khasis. It gave them a sense of belonging. The practice of burning charcoal and putting rice on these live pieces of coal are instances in point. Live charcoals were believed to drive the devils away and rice symbolised prosperity for the occupants. When the beams of the house on top were in position for the rood to be assembled, there was feasting for the helpers

and for the entire village if possible. The shortest man had to jump for a fish tied to the door with a string.

A new symbolic perspective is the naming of houses. The lyngdoh's house called 'Umlang' after his native village, reflects retention of his ties to it.

(c) Acculturative:

Influences of Christianity, urbanisation, industrialisation, education, and the impact of C.D. Schemes are visible in the building of churches, a new concept of housing rendered possible by a new ideology and new resources, an expanding, progressive and monetised economy that binds the village increasingly to the urban centre, increasing use of modern transport, better communication by way of roads and bridges and progressive agriculture. When a cement concrete house has Christian occupants, uses iron and faces the east, the shelter reflects acculturative processes. The secular concept reflects itself only to the extent of tolerance of other religions. With inter-marriage and inter-dining between orthodox and christian Khasis, the SSP acquires a new aesthetic dimension. Sophistication is known increasingly to all villagers. Leisure is important and youngsters jealously guard their skipping ground. New structures at the entrance to the village, construction of new huts near recent fields opened to agriculture, or jungles opened to industry and cultivation testify to the growth of the village in the outskirts.

Nearly 6% of the population of Nongkrem consists of students. Graduates and other college students are influenced by modern ideas of architecture. These youngsters are also responsible for increase in the number of corporate village institutions e.g. clubs and youth centers and activities such as arranging meetings and cultural programmes, the cleaning of roads, and beautification of the village.

### PART III: GARO HILLS AND THE GAROS

The Garo Hills district of Meghalaya at the western end of the Shillong Plateau has an approximate area of 8,084 square kilometers and 2,338<sup>6</sup> number of inhabited villages. There is 1 urban center and the percentage of the urban to the total population is 3.81. The Census of 1971 gives the following population figures.

|      | <u>Persons</u> | <u>Males</u> | <u>Females</u> |
|------|----------------|--------------|----------------|
| 1971 | 406.615        | 208.488      | 198.117        |

The district average of the density of population per square kilometer was 50 persons and the decennial population growth rate was 32.35 as against the population rate of Meghalaya which is 31.50.

### RENGSANGGRI VILLAGE: UNIVERSE 2

Rengsanggri village named after a rivulet Rengsang which intersects, it faces the north-east. The entrance is at an attitude of approximately 1,100 feet and the range of peaks

forming a back-drop rises to about 1,300 feet. It could be described as a submontane village lying 16 kilometers to the north of Tura. Burling wrote in 1963 that villagers of Rengsanggri made regular trips to the Tura market. He further wrote that village had 60 households and was therefore about as big as a village ever becomes.<sup>7</sup> In 1971, the village had 72 households.<sup>8</sup> Its population merged with nearby villages was reported to number 332. The village is 'the center of Garo Christian activities today'.<sup>9</sup> An all-weather road runs through the village, dividing it into two portions.

Rengsanggri is near the <sup>former</sup> important cotton market centre of Rongram. It belongs to the same village cluster as 4 other villages\* which are generally within the usual radius of marriage ties. As neighbouring villages, they may be considered related and one village may be believed to be the original village from which the founders of the other 'daughter' villages moved.<sup>10</sup>

My informants told me that the village was formed primarily for the purposes of agriculture, and the

many rivulets and jungle must have suited the purpose admirably. The Nokma belonged to the Sangma lineage. Burling mentions 4 marriage types.<sup>11</sup> According to the rules of Garo exogamy, matri-local residence and preferential mating, the SSP is shaped by the resident matrilineal families in Rengsanggri who are either Maraks or Sangmas and call themselves Matabongs,

---

\* Songmaggri, Atsimagri, Nokwatgri and Asonganggri.



a local subdivision of Garos. Property, primarily in the form of land over which a shelter was constructed for a new couple was inherited through females. Thus, Rengsanggri conforms not only to the concept of kinship and territory but also to that of property. With an approximate area of 40 square kilometers, the village is big by standards of Garo Hills. In my field-study, I noticed that most families with a 3-generation depth had 7 to 10 members. In smaller familial units, the members were 3. At an average of 5 members per family, the current population would number 360. The density of population per square kilometer stands at 9. Unlike other new Garo villages, or 30-40 year old villages, Rengsanggri is at least 150 years old. The old nokma, a great grand father said that 3 earlier generations had occupied the site. The prestige of his office was symbolised by his elaborate residence which was typically Garo and near which stood a nokpante or a bachelor's house, where Garo youth met and lived with their peer-group.

#### CHOICE OF UNIVERSE:

Rengsanggri village, a stable settlement, was chosen as the universe as it is a stable Garo settlement, is a stronghold of Garo culture inspite of exposure to Christian influences and is near the urban centre and district head quarters - Tura, near Rongram, the market-place, and also the C.D. Block head-quarters.

Some relevant chronological dates:

1. Setting up of Garrowana (Garo Hills) as a separate administrative unit. 1866
2. Setting up of present headquarters at Tura 1867
3. Making Garo Hills a deregulationised district and defining of Garo Hills District 1869
4. Garo Hills Regulation 1882
5. Starting of the C.D. Block 1958
6. First plying of a vehicle 1966
7. Coming of Christianity 1968
8. Formation of sub-state of Meghalaya 1970
9. (i) Meghalaya becomes a state 1972  
(ii) Tura becomes a town
10. (i) First plying of State-owned transport  
(ii) Building of the main village road by P.W.D.  
(iii) Occupation of the 7th Gittim or territorial unit in the village  
(iv) Building of the Baptist Church 1974

PHYSICAL FEATURES OF THE VILLAGE

This riverine village, intersected by a number of rivulets in the valley, is spread over nearly 40 kilometers. The hills, covered with a thick jungle, undulate between an approximate attitude of 1,000 to 1,300 feet. The brown patches and burnt stumps on some slopes testify to 'jhuming'. Sacrificial emblems - memorial posts and houses, and altars for offering sacrifices to deities appeased during sickness are part of the residential portion of the village landscape. Supernatural beings reside in the jungle near a tree stream or waterfall.



The villagers said that this year, the jhuming land i.e. land cleared and cultivated at the foot-hills and the slope was less than the un-cultivated forest and jungle. Fallow land was negligible and the residential area much lesser than the jhuming land. An all-weather road divided the village into two main portions. Besides 2 main entrances, the other 5 or 6 village entrances were by little paths constructed with the Block Funds.

#### SETTLEMENT PATTERN OF RENGSAANGRI

A description of the 7 gittims is helpful in the study of SSP, a village with flexible boundaries. The practice of jhuming and expansion of the residential areas enable an approximate pattern of the settlement pattern of 7 gittims. Details described below include those about the central growth, the elite area, the village outskirts, places of rural corporate life, the building of the first church, the impact of urbanisation, migration, industrialisation and the use of technology.

Rengsang, the oldest and largest gittim is named after the rivulet. Proceeding from the Rongram market square towards the south, one kept its extension to the entire left of the road and on the right are situated six gittims\*, much smaller in size. It has 26 dwelling units. The elite units include the house of the senior village chief,<sup>†</sup> and the 'nokpante' - the bachelor's dormitory symbolising Garo culture, like the Lyngdoh's house

\* See sketch of village at Annexure-2.

in Nongkrem 'A'. The old chief told me that his house stood on the original site on which Wangala, the harvest festival was celebrated. The nokpante had been built a new 4 years ago and the chief said that the non-christian Garo or 'Songsarek' \* youth made increasing use of it for residential and other purposes. This big dormitory is on platforms higher than other houses. Burling<sup>12</sup> states that the main post in the dormitory may be carved or coloured and subjects of ornamentation include human beings, tigers and other animals. But in the new bachelor's house, the accent is more on functionality than aesthetics. Here, a cement base for taps lay unused. At the other end of this gittim, a few tin sheds. \*\*

The Garos neither prefer nor avoid any particular direction for entrance to the house. But in the early windows for houses at first. The house of the senior chief had no windows whereas the in house of his christian son-in-law, the heir-apparent, there were windows as in other houses built on levelled land, imitating the pattern of the plains tribals. These houses had latticed openings. The Garo belief was that evil spirits may enter through windows<sup>13</sup> but the present explanation was that the winds and rains were strong. The holding of a feast for the privilege of a window or a door mentioned by Playfair<sup>14</sup> was not mentioned.

---

\* The olders Garos called themselves Songsarek to distinguish themselves from the Christian kin.

\*\* are constructed in 1977 by the Atomic Energy Commission, Pipes provide water for this area and a generator provides electricity.

The chief's house, a symbol of authority, prestige and wealth is also the unit of primary production and consumption<sup>15</sup> like other affluent households. One's daily activities from work in the fields, to eating and sleeping are generally carried on there. The primary difference between the houses of these prestigious families and the non-poor ones is the allotment of space for the 7 to 8 household functions. In affluent house simple shacks are constructed for various functions such as storing grain, field-houses, wood-sheds, stocking vegetables and other land produce, and keeping livestock, and these are simple structures.

The typical Garo house built on piles of posts and if possible on a steep incline, has walls made of matting and the roof is of straw or bamboo leaves. Houses of the chief and other affluent Garos have cane roofs. A few families have field houses near paddy lands bordering the road. Houses of Songsareks are dark and gloomy whereas Christian houses are better planned, windows enabling both light and air to the occupants. Houses are divided into three principal parts. The main living occupying 2/3 of the house with no partitions to but divide only well-defined areas. At the foot of the central part, nearest the door, is the abode of spirits where sacrifice is performed for propitiation and offerings are made. At the next post in the centre of the house, the liquor pot is kept the earth is laid on a bed of plantain stems on the bamboo floor.<sup>16</sup> As the chimney is absent, the smoke escape only through the projection

of the roof. A platform of bamboo matting supported by pots stands over the fireplace and holds cooking pots and household utensils of earth, bamboo and dry gourds, as also dried vegetables and fruits. Meals are taken beyond the fireplace and unmarried women slept there. The small room, often partitioned off for this purpose. A few affluent houses had dry latrines. Washing of utensils or clothes and bathing was generally done near the rivulets.

In spite of the visiting pattern of the Garos, whether during festivals for errands or for casual gossip, the social boundary between one household and another is distinct. Most houses are in the central part of the village but the current simultaneous expansion is at the edge or outskirts because of wet cultivation technique for paddy. In the songs and dances by the chorons celebrating the building of a new house, words meaning 'tying' or binding' are repetitive. These are Garo exhortations to the spirit binding firmly component parts of the house and consolidating the builders' work. The villagers participate in building structures meant for dwelling purposes but six or seven years ago, labourers demanded payment for building other structures. The space surrounding houses of the poor is barely 100 feet. Smaller gittims house 3 or 4 families. The forest or tree-top houses are almost non-existent as the menace of attacks by elephant herds has been reduced.

Gittims II and III have nearly 7 Christian houses and with Gittim I account for the 20 per cent Christian population of the village. The Nokma's heir has an impressive house nearer the road and the planning is better. An erected stone wall is built to construct a new kitchen and dwelling unit. The house has steps of concrete and doors and windows, like a couple of other houses, are painted green. A little away stands the house of a Christian matrikin, a smaller unit but equally well-planned and with tin roof and painted windows. I visited the Baptist Church in 1974 and some families told me about their plans to be converts. Songsareks said they associated Christianity with temperance, literacy and education, and better a style of life. Christians did not observe early Garo rituals and ceremonies. But they did desert a few houses where deaths by accident or disease had occurred. SSP therefore showed promise in a village where only a small portion are unit had electricity, a scheme for water supply or a dispensary.

Because of many springs and rivulets, the soil was favourable for growing fruits and vegetables, paddy and millet. Cows were kept by some, pigs by few families and goats by a family or two. A stream surrounding Gittim II joined the main stream parallel to the road dividing the village into two portions. Land was in plenty but the problem of accommodating more people in future was being discussed. Use of new material was sparse and no vertical use of space was used as in Nongkrem.

### TECHNOLOGICAL IMPROVEMENT

The village has 2 cement concrete bridges and a numbers of wooden bridges of planks, stumps and bamboos. The main road has improved communication. As communications promised more openings, many grooms from other villages sought brides from Rengsanggri as they inherited land. The tendency was to settle in the village. In Nongkrom improvement in communication resulted in the decline in the number of migrants from the village; in Rengsanggri it acted as a force to draw more people. Water supply came in 1968 and was by pipes, hoses or taps in 2 or 3 houses, but no water tanks were built. A cement concrete well was unused. 'Jhuming' still dominated the agricultural style inspite of acceptance of some improved agricultural techniques since opening of the Block. New crops were also grown. The small norm of the family was unacceptable. Over a dozen births were reported annually.

### PRESENT VILLAGE ECONOMY:

The main sources of livelihood for most occupants of Rengsanggri are agriculture and keeping of livestock. The major portion of economy is if a subsistent type. In 1972, ginger substituted cotton as it is more profitable and the soil became less suitable for cultivation of cotton. Pineapple is also cultivated on a large scale. In the annual multi-crop pattern, paddy, millet, vegetable and fruit are ready for consumption and the surplus is sold for the individual crop,



the pattern may be of a bi-crop or mono-crop pattern. Agriculture is nature-fed i.e. by rain and streams. Richer households numbering about 10 quoted an income of Rs. 6,000 to 7,000 a year. The non-poor families, 42 in number, quoted Rs. 2,000 to 6,000 as the annual income and the poorer families numbering about 15 earned Rs. 6,00 to Rs. 1,000 per year. Food, clothing and shelter were available to every one but cash income was smaller than in Nongkrem where economy was more progressive and surplus. Illiteracy and a conservative outlook maned the progress in Nongkrem although there were potentialitiés. The impact of the Block is mainly in agriculture and communication. Urbanisation and industrialisation made little impact. No village owned any transport vehicle, and the style of construction was basically local. A slight change was noticeable. Growth of the SSP was horizontal, and there were 5 formal institutions in the village - the Church, the lower primary school the Atomic Energy Department's complex, the nokpante, and the Christian boarding house.

#### CHANGE IN THE CONCEPT OF SHELTER AND SETTLEMENT

Less change is visible in the SSP in Rengsanggri than in Nongkrem and is presented below from three perspectives:

##### (a) Functional-Technical

There are 72 houses for a population of about 360 consisting of two clans, an increase of 12 houses since 1956 when

Burling mentions 60 households. Around 1960, the two Garo families accepted Baptism. The current number is 7. Adherence of christian Garos to matrilineal inheritance, clan exogamy and the four patterns of marriage mentioned earlier have left the village relatively unaffected. A new aspect of growth is the necessity for more houses near the paddy fields brought increasingly under wet cultivation, and more grooms from outside choosing brides from Rengsangri and setting with them in the village. Independent units for new couples were part of the earlier Garo system and in only two homesteads with married heir-couples stayed in one common unit and shared a common hearth.

Some relatively new Garo houses built on a level with the ground have latticed openings, reflect influence of the plains tribals. Apart from the building of houses stilts, the making of more doors and windows, the building of concrete steps and the use of Corrugated Iron sheets in some houses, there is little functional or technical change. But, the neat and regular christian houses, the garden and other planned use of space, while retaining the earlier Garo pattern and technique, reflects a meeting point of the functional-technical, symbolic and acculturative processes. Two Christian houses had compost pits and bamboo stands for drying clothes. Gates and fences are new additions and the discountinuing of participation in festivals as Wangala and of propitiation of deities effaces the need for construction of sacrificial emblems among Christians and among Songsareks. In two Christian houses, however there



were preparations for sacrificial offerings for sick occupants of the house. Most houses do not have separate places for bathing or even washing clothes and utensils. A few houses had pit-latrines. In Christian houses there were pictures of Christ and of Western cities and of actresses also.

Improvement in communication, the C.D. Block schemes and Christianity have effected changes minor in the SSP. In the simple life-style of the village, the difference between the rich and poor families is not glaring.

(b) Symbolic

Subtle changes occurring in Rengsanggri suggest that the economy has received slight impetus. The 20% Christian Garos of Rengsanggri were accepted as leaders by the Songsareks and at present more families were accepting christianity. The church is a symbol of new influences christians discontinued rituals of incantation during occupation of the new house, drinking and participation in festivals. The newly constructed boarding house, a revived of the 'nokpante' culture is again symbolic of the meeting point of the functional-technical, symbolic and acculturative.

Growth is at a slower pace and the quantity lesser. The SSP leaves scope for betterment. The tie to the village is deep and the linkage is more to natural objects than the clan. For instance, the bridge is named after rivulet Wakah and certain gittims viz. Rengsang are named after the rivulet. Yot other gittims are named after natural objects as rivulets or hillocks. The kyntoits in Nongkrem are named after the original clans.

(c) Acculturative:

The influence of christianity is visible in the building of the church and the improved concept of having of the Garo christian. Urbanisation leaves its imprint in the increasingly monetised economy and preference for cash crops. Schools and administrative units, the occupation of new gittims, building of roads and bridges, improved agricultural practices in a village that was 'jhum-minded', reflect on the gradual acculturative processes in the SSP of Rengsanggri. Christians and Songsareks marry but the social organisation, residence pattern and inheritance of property remain undisturbed and there is equitable distribution of property. This is so, although the village is situated near the Rongram market and the C.D. Block where buildings are similar to Khasi buildings after the earthquake of 1897, a pattern called the Assam type although advised by Japanese experts. Watch houses are not required since menace of wild elephants is under control. With increasing opening of jungles to industry and cultivation, new field houses will be required. The low level of literacy and poor education restrict the cash income by way of labour or trade to a small amount. As formal institutions are only four, unlike Nongkrem, growth in Rengsanggri is in an embryonic stage. The village is hear static inspite of the initiation in change through agencies as the C.D. Block and Baptist Mission. Two years ago, church services were stopped and there was no conversion. But recently, there is a slight increase in the rate of conversion. The 'rurban'

contour in Rengsanggri is more rural than urban in the sectors of economy, education and literacy. In Nongkrem, the urban contour is more prominent.

#### PART IV: CONCLUSION

The present crisis in universes 1 and 2 may be summed up as a crisis of growth and an identity that is changing or needs change as evident in the change in economy, literacy, education etc. as reflected in the growth of the village. In Nongkrem it led to the emergence of a few elite families enjoying wealth and opportunities for education. The struggle for power was visible, challenging the earlier egalitarian order and the search is one of a village with more segments in it than before. In Rengsanggri, change seems imperative and a new and wider identity is necessitated as segments are minimal on the criteria of wealth or education.

In both cases, the crisis is moral universe 1 reflects a divided and awakened identity needing maturity for growth whereas in universe 2, the search for an identity has begun but it is in an early stage and needs to be aroused.

The change in correlates is placed below:-

|  | <u>Khasi Hills<br/>(Nongkrem)</u> | <u>Garo Hills<br/>(Rengsanggri)</u> |
|--|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Level 1: 1. Shelter and<br>settlement<br>pattern | Major Variation                   | Minor Variation                     |
| Level 2: 2. Natural<br>environment               |                                   |                                     |
| (a) Man:Nature                                   | Major Variation                   | Minor Variation                     |
| (b) Man:Super-<br>natural                        | Major Variation                   | Minor Variation                     |
| (c) Man:Technology                               | Major Variation                   | Minor Variation                     |
| Level 3: 3. Symbolic Nature<br>or Culture        | Minor Variation                   | Minor Variation                     |

Nongkrem is changing fast in comparison to Rengsanggri which is more conservative in outlook.

In the case of Nongkrem, levels 1 and 2 have changed more than level 3. The finding is that change in the natural environment has been a more potent factor than symbolic change in effecting a major change in the SSP.

In the case of Rengsanggri, all the 3 levels have seen more or less similar changes. The relative isolation of the highlander explains his in-groupness and conservatism that led to the retention of his symbolic system. Hence a change in level 3 i.e. man's symbolic system or culture is likely to bring about a change in the SSP as it has among the Khasis of Meghalaya.

\*\*\*\*\*

## R E F E R E N C E S

- 1 GOVERNMENT OF MEGHALAYA 1971 - District Census Handbook, United Khasi and Jaintia Hills District, Shillong, Government of Meghalaya.
- 6 GOVERNMENT OF MEGHALAYA 1971 - District Census Handbook, Garo Hills District, Shillong, Government of Meghalaya.
- 8 RONGRAM DEVELOPMENT BLOCK 1971 - List of Villages with Population According to 1971 Census under Rongram Development Block, Mimeographed.
- 2, 4&5 NATARAJAN, NALINI, 1971 - The Missionary Among the Khasis, New Delhi, Sterling Publishers Pvt.Ltd., p.5, p.32.
- 3 LYNGDOH R.S.(Ed.), 1978 - Souvenir published at the Investiture Ceremony of Dr. Balajied Singh Syiem of Hima Khyrim on August 26, 1978, Kamala Art Press, Shillong, p.13, p.25.
- 7-9&13 BURLING ROBINS 1963, Rongsangqri: Family and Kinship in a Garo Village, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, p.24, p.312, p.332, p.213, p.38, p.50.
- 14-16 PLAYFAIR, A. 1975, The Garos (Reprint), Gauhati, p.36.

\*\*\*\*\*

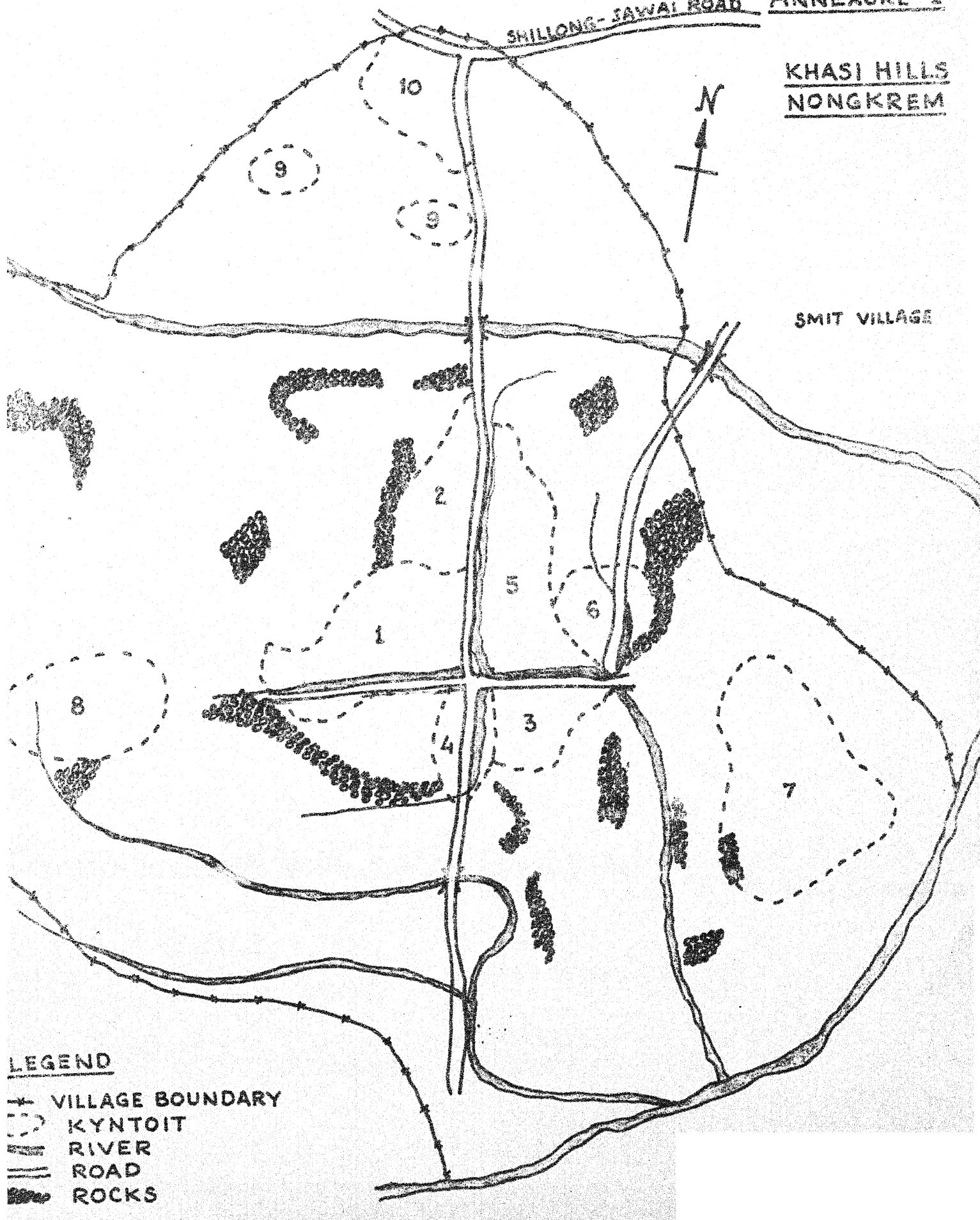
## A B B R E V I A T I O N S :

- SSP - Shelter and Settlement Pattern.
- CD - Community Development
- SFDA - Small Farmer's Development Agency
- CI - Corrugated Iron
- PWD - Public Works Department.



KHASI HILLS  
NONGKREM

SMIT VILLAGE

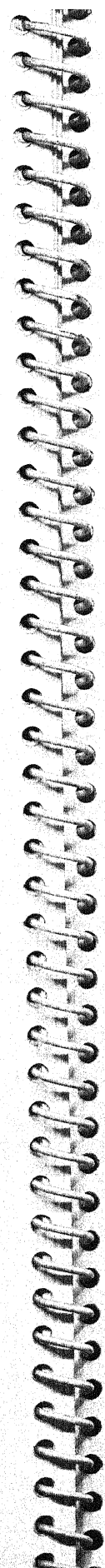


LEGEND

- + VILLAGE BOUNDARY
- KYNTOIT
- ~ RIVER
- == ROAD
- ROCKS

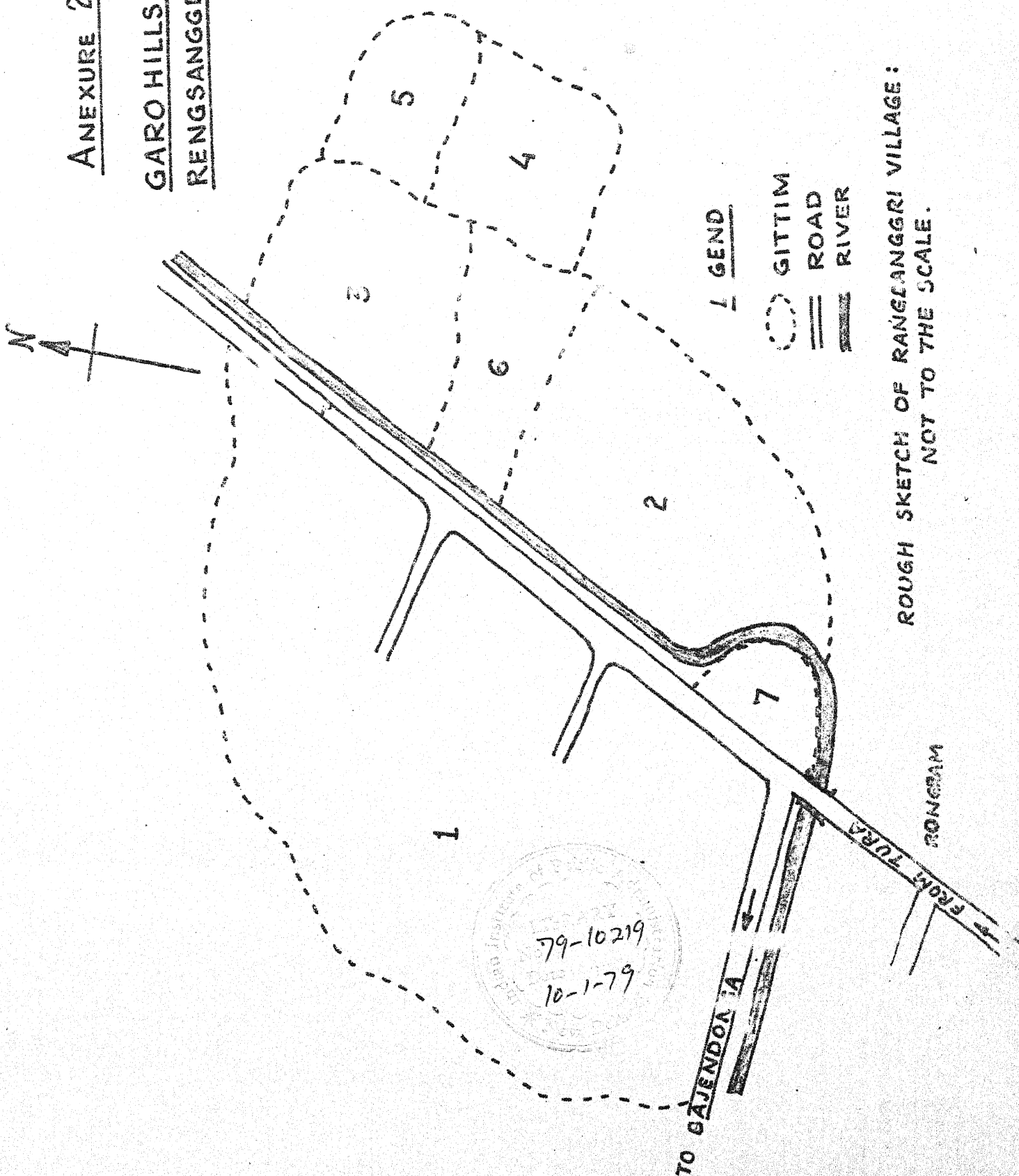


19 23/24



ANEXURE 2

GARO HILLS  
RENGSANGGRI



1 GEND

○ GITTIM

== ROAD

~ RIVER

ROUGH SKETCH OF RANGSANGGRI VILLAGE:  
NOT TO THE SCALE.